

# **An Interview with Sharon Swenson**



**Brigham Young University  
Theatre and Media Arts**

**Dean Duncan:** Could you tell us about your background, helping us to understand who you are and what it means to be a girl from Cedar City?

**Sharon Swenson:** One of the things about growing up in Cedar is that you have absolutely no idea there is a larger world. It goes back historically. I would not quit climbing in my grandmother's big giant log pile that came down from the mountain behind her house. My grandfather brought the logs down, and I kept doing it—it was the only noncompliant thing I did as a child. So my father got used ties from electrical poles, which is what he worked with for a living, and he built me a hut. It was on the edge of the garden—he grew corn so high, and I would retreat in there most of my childhood summers. I would be in there, I had the floor brushed—you know how dirt can get—and there was a fence on one side. The cows would graze around, and I still remember thinking, dreaming, having stories, and just living in this other place that wasn't quite held in time or space. Listening to the cows—they graze and then chew their cud—and the corn rustling. There's an advantage of being there in that place, and being given space.

**Dean:** Were you reading in there, or were they your own stories?

**Sharon:** I read all the time. In fact, they used to drag me out to my brother's Little League and then Pony League football games, and I'd go play marbles in the back because I lost interest. He was a pitcher and quite alarmingly singular.

They could get me outside, but they couldn't make me be really active. I wasn't reading; I was just some place. It's the first time I realized that's what literature does, that's what good critical studies materials do, that's what films do. So it was sort of like, *Oh I want to be in that place*—the place that is somehow physical and real and grounded with some solid representational dimension, but is also full of this magic of leaving that place and expanding that place and moving through time.

**Dean:** Ed Adams, our recently deposed associate dean, comes from Flint, Michigan, which isn't remotely like Cedar, but here's the comparison: he says his folks were working folks, and he was surrounded by working folks that he was raised with, and he appreciated working folk values. He's a professorly guy now, and I don't see him as being any kind of snooty, but he sometimes feels a poignant distance between the roots and the present reality. You're suggesting that your agricultural roots are not at all inconsistent with the theoretical place. Could you elaborate on that a little?

**Sharon:** I can. Part of it is that we spent our summers where my grandfather and all the siblings had a range up at the head of the Zion narrows. We would go up there in the summer, and sometimes you'd do guided meditations—well, you may not, but some people do.

They say, "Go inside, read deeply, and go to the place where you'll feel safest."

For me, it's in some scrub oak over the Black Rock Canyon where the north fork of the Virgin River comes down. There's an orchard with apples that were planted around 1870. You are in that place, and it is absolutely translucent.

Now, that happens all the time, there are kids falling off horses, dogs are jumping in the ditch and then jumping up on you, other people are working really hard rounding up cows and feeding the stove. What I found is there's an immense kind of practicality there.

I've never felt actually comfortable, per se, in higher education—except it is so fun to hear people's ideas, and to talk ideas, and to create a space in a classroom that is talking about cinematic spaces and to get that and weave it together. I think I would say—it's when you're in that place of talking about films, watching films, and reading what people have written about films—whether it's in your textbook or what students have written. As you know, students have the most amazing ideas and experience.

So it's like you're in this place, but where you're living, your soul space, is this other place. For me it's always been connected to a sense of the gospel. It's a very practical gospel I grew up with—a very practical sense of *Yes, we're going to go out and make the corn work*. But there are also these places you can find. Where—I don't know how to explain it. As I grow older it becomes more important to be in those spaces.

I must say that I truly find—and if there’s estrangement for our dear friend Ed—part of it is, I think, that administrative work and logistically handling organizations is soul rotting to my key place of where I want to live.

**Dean:** It’s interesting, because you’re in film, and some film properly has a reputation for removing us from realities, for causing us to misrecognize. But what you described is the kind of processing that takes place when any person in this community, in a space with people that she loves or maybe is annoyed with—

**Sharon:** Both.

**Dean:** Whatever the complexity—you remove yourself, but not in a disastrous way. You’re reflective about your place, which is critical studies.

**Sharon:** I think it is. It’s also the perspective and understanding. You live in the world, you function in the world, then you do things. But at the same time, when you’re transported through reading or seeing, you’re taken to another place, but then you’re not finished. You have to come back and absorb it and process it and reflect on it. I think that is what is essential.

The difficulty when you’re in a system that requires layering hierarchy—we all know grades have to come in, etc. You lose that chance to reflect. I love teaching. One reason is, though I hate grading, that I love reading people’s ideas and seeing how they’ve developed them. You move into their soul, into their space. The best work isn’t just intellectual: here are a series of ideas, but here is a series informed by my unique perspective. So when a student writes about *The Fountain*, I don’t know if I like *The Fountain*, but I love what students write about it, because they see it in a very different way. They make connections, and as they go through and weave it together, it astonishes me.

**Dean:** You’re talking and we’ve got all these binaries, and it’s interesting. In our stake these days, talking to the youth particularly, we’re talking about how binaries exist, and we need to be true to the right side, to the correct side, because there’s good and evil, and we want good and we don’t want evil. But I’m thinking of light and darkness, health and sickness, pleasure and pain, and those aren’t good/bad binaries, they’re just experience. Like “Eat not the fruit, multiply and replenish,” and Mary and Martha. What you have described is a kind of reconciliation between semiotics—what I intend to say. You’re listening to the students and anxious to hear them—and phenomenology, what you receive. It’s even a reconciliation between production and theory.

**Sharon:** I think in some ways it is. It’s a most interesting kind of production. All production, whether you’re doing films, websites, even your Facebook, as well as intellectual writing, is putting yourself out there in some way, exploring that identity, and looking at it.

**Dean:** Making a statement that means something?

**Sharon:** Right, and it does. We had a really fun gospel doctrine lesson on resurrection and talked about the road to Emmaus. Then we talked about the way in which they did not understand what was happening to them, and the disciples who didn’t get it. My sense is that’s the process most of us go through. I told students that we were doing hermeneutics; they weren’t very happy that I said we were doing hermeneutics. I think they’d prefer not to do hermeneutics.

**Dean:** At least use a different word.

**Sharon:** Then we went into sacrament meeting, and the youth trek reported that they did a tree of life and the iron rod exercise. When they got to the tree of life, it was hung with Twinkies. That made the day

so fabulous. Forget fish, bread, breaking, recognition, nonrecognition—let's go to the tree of life and find Twinkies, which we never would have expected. (I guess they're not too unwholesome.) I love whoever thought of that. They look like lights, little globes, little incandescent lights that are Twinkies. They loved them; she loved them.

**Dean:** Tell us about how an English student in college became a film professor.

**Sharon:** Okay, I would be happy to. Let me explain that when I discovered critical studies, I thought I'd died and gone to heaven—honestly. Some people are excited about genealogy and the prospect of doing all eternity in genealogy, and when I found out there were critical studies, so you not only read things, but there were systems that you looked at them through and then you wove them together, I thought, *This is so exciting*. So I did critical studies.

Then I met the man that I would marry, and he liked movies. On our first date, we went to *The Exterminating Angel*. I was a young girl, twenty years old, from Cedar City, who had never seen any kind of film like that in my life, and I realized there was something new afoot. So part of it for me is the charm of falling in love and having that connection.

At the same time, the University of Utah, where I was studying, was burgeoning into film studies in the English department. I got to take all these wonderful ideas that were coming. You say semiotics? We had just found out about it, and jumped into it, and then started thinking about how it worked with films. Pauline Kael was writing; André Bazin had died, but his word was going on. There were amazing experiences of some place new you could go.

A lot of higher education, especially at the graduate level, is just reploting the ground to see if you can find a new little shard, and then to deduce from that that the bronze tools were actually made with, "Ahh! Copper?" That's what you do over and over again, replot the ground. But here was a great new one. You had the paradigms and thinking and you took it to a whole new body of work. It was that renaissance when, finally, art film reached Utah.

**Dean:** This was virgin earth, essentially, which was why it was so exciting.

**Sharon:** Oh, it was! The films were new, the critical ideas were new, and luckily they indulged my desire to say, "I'm not going to do English anymore, I'm going to hippity-hop and do critical studies with this new subject matter."

I have to say that I think I did due diligence. I know more about Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning than I would care to say. There was some solid study of American and British Literature. We skipped the Scots, and never got to Robert Burns—I don't know how we did that one; it is scandalous when you think about it. But I read a lot of great works.

At the same time—this is astonishing—women's studies reached Utah. What a great time to be in higher education! It was, "Wow!"

It's interesting, because I finished my master's, and I was waiting to get pregnant. The truth is that my academic career grew out of the fact that we were infertile. I thought, *I'll just go to grad school until I get pregnant*. My husband was working in Salt Lake City. It didn't happen, it didn't happen, it didn't happen, and before I knew it, I was ABD—I'd done everything but my dissertation for a doctorate. Finally we adopted, and I entered into a whole new phase of my life.

By the time the kids had grown up some, my husband was an editor, a writer, and a movie reviewer. I was working part-time, and I thought, *Well, maybe I'd like to teach full-time*. I submitted an application to BYU, but nothing happened and they hired somebody else.

Then a year later, Harold Oaks called me up and said, "We'd like to bring you down for an interview."

I went down, and they said, "You're really going to have to finish your dissertation."

I said, "Okay. It's been eight years, of course I remember everything."

**Dean:** Because life happened.

**Sharon:** It did, and it was great. It was a good experience.

I had to go back and renew some course work, and it was the best thing that ever happened, because between the ideas that had developed and the new faculty that had come, it was this most illuminating crossing of ideas. Bakhtin was there, and I know he was around before, but he wasn't there when I had been.

**Dean:** Why was that? What did that poor guy, with all of his dialogic—how did that communicate?

**Sharon:** Dialogism, Heteroglossia—the whole idea that one is moving towards you. Are you imposing a voice? Are you laying it out and asking will voices come in? And are you speaking in many tongues? It's phenomenological. It's that recognition of when someone says something, you get to hear it, but you also get to think about what it is. The whole idea of chronotopes, time and space, how you move through time and space in a literary work—I took that and applied it to film.

So when talking about a way to organize art genres—usually it was by director at that point—I'd say, "No, let's talk about chronotopes. Let's talk about characteristic time and space and how it works in certain artwork." So you have another way of thinking semiotically and phenomenologically. It's interesting because it's the same time movement that we see now coming out in *Inception* and those other films you mentioned.

**Dean:** So much of the early English stuff—it makes sense, how could they do otherwise—but there's a lot of effort given to translate English-specific things, literature-specific things, to a medium that isn't all that literary.

**Sharon:** Oh, yes.

**Dean:** As we discuss time and space, though, you were finding something that was profoundly theatrical or cinematic, because it's time and space.

**Sharon:** It is time and space, and it's working in films, but I must tell you the truth: I think I honestly didn't get clearly educated in film until I came to BYU and started collaborating with Tom Lefler, who was at the Motion Picture Studio at that time. I remember talking with him about classes and teaching and what's the best way to do it, and he gave me ideas.

One of his ideas that I loved was watching *Wild Strawberries* over and over again for half a semester until everybody got it. Andrew Sarris was doing that with *Citizen Kane*, I think. I thought that was the strangest idea I'd ever heard of, but what was really clear was that you move into a realm of thinking about what's going on that isn't literary, and that is uniquely cinematic.

I thought about time and space, but there's so much more about the nuances of the way representation functions in film. I would say that, and my students, really gave me my education.

**Dean:** It's not time and space measurably, absolutely, objectively. That film particularly is a very subjective time and space.

**Sharon:** It is, and in some ways you can argue that I'm still in Cedar City listening to the cornfield and the cows, or watching *Wild Strawberries* and going on Isak Borg's journey with him.

**Dean:** Tom talked about—we didn't ask people to gossip, but we asked people to mention people that were important—and Tom spoke warmly about your relationship professionally and as friends. You're both farm kids. Is this worth pursuing, that there's something earthy about your background that's become beneficial to what you've done here?

**Sharon:** He's the Kamas kid, and no one can match it. He did Kamas; he jumped out of airplanes; he was on a mission with Sterling Van Wagenen. I have to say I think that's uniquely qualified. His dad was a banker, so that's a unique skill set.

I do think there's something different about people who grow up in a very practical environment that hasn't particularly got strong class divisions, and is a very homogeneous community with not a lot of diversity. That leads you to think about things. The only black persons I saw in Cedar were conductors on trains that would come through, who would drop in and watch a baseball game sometimes. That was it. There was no Asians, and there was a whole set of complexities around the Paiute Indians that were in the area. That's connected to a whole set of other cultural things.

**Dean:** It's there, and people are mindful of it, but they don't necessarily explore or understand the roots, which is true of all of us everywhere.

**Sharon:** We were in the Indian Adoption Program, which gave me a very unique perspective. That was pretty remarkable when I was nine years old. Having him, Tommy, in our home for eight or nine years—it was transformative, because you see something so very different, and the only thing to account for it is to back up and think about it.

**Dean:** Sounds like it's complicatedly transformative.

**Sharon:** It still comes up as a paradigm when you look at things that don't fit, or when you thought an experience was this way, but then you look at it and say, "No, from here it's like this."

**Dean:** Does that relate to kids who come and study film here? We've got curriculum; we've got expectations and conventions. Do some kids come and they don't fit and it's good for us?

**Sharon:** I don't know if I could say what the students who come here are like in general. They're very different.

I've been trying to think about the difference when I came in '87 to where we are now, and there's a new technology savviness. Our students have an amazing intelligence and innocence and passion. I think there are people who don't "fit" the model, but I always felt like I never fit. If you talk to people who knew me in my teens or twenties, and tell them I am teaching at BYU, they would be astonished. I don't think it's a natural fit at all.

I live in Salt Lake City, and I have more non-Mormon friends, and people ask, "Well, how do you stand it at BYU?" They'll hear very strange things.

I say, "Well, that's not my experience. It's not."

You'd just left when I came, then Richard Dutcher came through. You look at the students involved in new Mormon cinema—you, Darl. How could we say there's a standard type that comes through the film program? I know as we review students it seems like often times there are some overlapping blind spots, but I think when you talk with students, they're very different.

**Dean:** I wonder if it's an administrative convenience for us to consider, a logistical convenience. We've got this kind of student or we've got three kinds, and we've put them into these drawers, and this is what we do with them. In fact it's more complicated.

**Sharon:** I think the fact is more complicated. I personally believe—okay, I'm going to bear my testimony of the film program at BYU. Dean, are you braced for it?

I marveled the first fall I was here. I was driving up to Aspen Grove; I'd been through faculty orientation, the first university conference, and I was driving up to Sundance, and I was thinking, *Dear Lord, help me get out of this*. I could not fathom that this was going to work for me.

I got a very strong feeling of peace that said, “It’s okay. You’re supposed to be here.”

My experience through it all is that however odd we are—and I think as a faculty we’re very diverse—I think our students get an interesting kind of nuance in the variation. This program exists at BYU because somewhere the Lord, or one of his really influential advisors, believes this is a good thing. It permutates and it goes through all these things, but we’re supposed to be here.

Every time something horrific happens and we think—I’m going to say it—*Hell no*, then it gets better. It changes, and then the changes go, and you don’t want to go there, but you go there and there it is.

Sometimes students are irritating, I will say that. Sometimes students don’t want to learn, or students don’t want to learn what I’m trying to teach, and that’s frustrating. But there are also people who bring really different things into the mix of what we’re doing, and the way they see the world certainly shakes me from having any single monolithic perspective. It’s like this to stay balanced.

**Dean:** Which keeps us from being fascists.

**Sharon:** I don’t know, I think we could find a group of people who’d vote for fascism.

**Dean:** Well, that is to say, “There’s one way, and I’m the person and I’m going to impose it on you.”

**Sharon:** Right, it does keep us from that. I can’t impose this on you, darn it. You’ll quit resisting.

**Dean:** When you were talking about practical people, you were making me think about Tom from Bakersfield and Darl from Fresno. Is that fair to say? Not that we need you to psychoanalyze those guys, and maybe they shouldn’t go together, because it’s not like they’re twins, but maybe you could talk about some of the things that they bring to and contribute to our conversation. Does it have to do with that Cedar/Kamas/central valley thing or not?

**Sharon:** Can we throw in a Canadian? One of the great things about coming early was the faculty. Lefler was here, Peter Johnson was here, Charles Metten was here, Tad Danielewski was here, and Paul Nibley was here. At various points, different people left and there were different configurations, but I got to be here when it grew and when we got more faculty. It was very interesting to see.

Tom Russell was one of the last students I taught. Tom came, he drifted in, and I’ll never forget the critical studies class he was in. It was so fun. As you know, even as a student he had his dry ironic way. What he brought there was his own study, working with a philosophy professor that influenced him. Then he left and lived and worked elsewhere and he had kids.

Every year for Education Week, he would come by and post a note on my door to say, “I’m here! What are you doing? This is what I’m doing.”

One year it said, “Can you believe it? They called me as a bishop.” This was pre-email.

So when we were looking for a film production person, one of the things I said to my good friend Tom was, “You need to hire this guy. This guy’s good. This guy’s very good. He has something we need here.”

Tom looks at me and we start interviewing, and there comes Russell with a unique experience—life experience, work experience, ways of dealing with students, ways of thinking about the world. And there he is.

Also Darl Larsen. Darl came to BYU; he finished his undergrad, he came here for his master’s, and he was my TA in History. That’s one great thing about being so old. You got to see everyone when they were youngins—except you look a lot the same, I would guess, as the first time I met you. What ten or twelve years ago?

**Dean:** Twenty years ago. 1992.

**Sharon:** It couldn’t be. Was it that long? I cannot believe it. There it is.

So Darl came as a grad student, and he was my TA in the history classes, and he was a great TA, but he was Darl—Darlness: This very quiet, kind of ironic person. We had one of the most closely intertwined relationships any person can have: that is thesis advisor and thesis writer. You get them locked in that.

He was writing about George Lucas, and it was the most fabulous thing I'd ever seen in my life. He did an amazing analysis that was a psychobiography reading. Then he went off and got a doctorate, and then he comes back. Darlness.

How much of that is Darl from the raisin lands, I don't know. Darl just seems to me that wherever he was rooted, he would grow up with who he is.

**Dean:** Some of us, then—and this is substantial and wonderful—are very much a reflection of, or a product of, our environments, and some people seem to be a bit independent of genetics and such.

**Sharon:** Which brings me to Canadians, who bring very different experiences because they have a different cultural view. I think bringing in the experience of USC, bringing in that knowledge of silent film, bringing in that awareness of a whole other educational system that comes from Canada and studying in Scotland—I mean, how could you find better people that are more different who could come and work together? I think that's been true with every faculty hire.

We went through some difficult times with production people—the production people found it hard, I think. We went through shifting and shifting and shifting until we stabilized with Russell.

**Dean:** Sterling used to talk with some concern about our diversity being excessive, and that it would be difficult for students to navigate their way through these waters because it would be hard to figure out how to bring this person and this sensibility and this set of requirements or expectations together. I've felt to disagree, and as you say this, it seems to me that it's good for students or human beings to have to navigate their way through diversity. Isn't that the case?

**Sharon:** I think it's absolutely wacky. As much as I think there are some people who would love to have us all with clearly defined objectives that match up with the program objectives and the mission of BYU, and it's all clearly stated, and we grade the same way and all of that, with a very cohesive flow where we make connections—but is life like that? No. Is work? Is post-graduate like that? No. If you're reading curriculum in Gospel Doctrine, every four years you come back to the same books, right? Would you want the same person teaching all of them? And when you came back to them would you want the same person? No, you're going to change and get experiences. So I think the more diversity, the better.

**Dean:** Sloppy, messy, challenging, but exhilarating.

**Sharon:** I think students are sometimes frustrated by that, but I think that's because students feel anxiety because they want to perform well, and they aren't clear about what that means to different people.

I think if we had a chance to say, "Look, we all want you to learn. We love film, we're passionate about the gospel, and we're excited about who you are. Come and learn this stuff, and if you want more information about how you're being evaluated, I can give that to you. Just ask for it."

These are very smart people who are very good independent thinkers, and if they're not good independent thinkers, we're not doing our job.

So if they don't know how to say, "This is weird; you're not like Darl"—which no one has ever said to me, by the way.

We could talk about who is the most alike on the faculty; that would be fun.

**Dean:** You see matched pairs?



**Sharon:** I think Tom Lefler and I have won “The most intimidating and horrific faculty members on initial introduction.” I think that’s clear. I used to think you had a head start on us, but it hasn’t turned out that way. I thought you could be a contender, but I think you’re more charming.

**Dean:** Which would bring us to Russell. I’ve got a question: you talked about how women’s studies were forming and formulating at a really wonderful and important time. How did that look? How does it look? How has that been a part of your life and work at BYU?

**Sharon:** I think one of the things that happened by taking time off to be a parent—being in the home and working part-time other places—one of the things that happened is you begin to realize there are so many things to see, things that had never occurred to you.

Most of critical studies since about 1970, I think, have worked to say, “No, this isn’t quite right. This isn’t quite right. What about this?”

What women’s studies did is exactly what ethnic studies would do later, which is to say, “This isn’t the whole story.” In some ways they’re deconstructing the whole canon of great work.

The fact that you would discover within your own mind these assumptions that had been planted in this literature without you asking, “Who wrote that and why did they write it?”

The Redemption of Harriet Beecher Stowe is one of the odd things where I’m unwilling to go there. I’m happy to reconstruct Elizabeth Barrett Browning, happy that some of the early writers and early women filmmakers—but film is never operated in the same way with women’s studies. It simply doesn’t apply there, as near as I can tell. There are theoreticians who examine it and think about it, but in terms of uniquely produced work that bears gender markers, I don’t think it’s happening.

I think it’s just a different way of looking at the world. It’s like listening, reading, and thinking about some of these ideas which now are coming from some of the writing about digital media. Some of the resonances of the whole social networking, like with women’s studies—the cross-cultural and class issues, listening to the cows chew their cud. They’re always eating grass and chewing their cud, but they’re all sort of doing it with some sort of ruminative—remember they have two or three stomachs; not the critics, I’m referring to the cows, the bovines. They’re going over it again and again, and some would argue that the final product is always the same. I don’t agree.

**Dean:** We’ll just let it grow. We don’t care, because it’s happening. I don’t think a woman wrote the book of Ruth—I don’t know that we know—but you were talking about how film—I’m going somewhere. You haven’t found film to be exactly prone to or helpful with regard to particularly female or gendered voice. Would that be the case?

**Sharon:** No, actually, I would say—well, the longer I live, the more I see there are complications with any binaries. If you look at black filmmaking, if you look at ethnic and ethnocentric filmmaking—colonial imperialism—if you look at gender, if you look at class, what you see is that it looks like there are these binaries, right?

Here’s dominant Hollywood film, and you want to say, “No. No, we need this alternative film.” But instead of wanting alternative film to come up, you have these two, it’s like this—boink. So you’ve still got your binaries, and what have you gained?

You’ve got some reconciliation for past injustices, but it’s more saying, “What are the voices saying here?”

What I love about women’s studies is understanding that there was a voice underneath the main text. In fact, that’s probably what most of my critical studies taught me: there’s a voice, or voices, under that critical text that are saying something else. There’s always attention, and if the text isn’t going against the grain, you can read it against the grain.

**Dean:** So that way lies, and has frequently lain, revision, and maybe revolution. What you describe seems more peaceful, and more what?

**Sharon:** I have never been assured that I should be zealous in anything but flossing my teeth and reading my scriptures more. I have never been inspired to go to a cause—well, I wouldn't say never. There have been moments in my administrative experience when I have felt called to be zealous, to say, "This is wrong, we need to change it." But I may just lack a certain kind of passion.

**Dean:** Wary of causes?

**Sharon:** No.

**Dean:** Aren't you describing the classic popular front liberal?

**Sharon:** I don't think so.

**Dean:** The reason I ask is that the liberal is sometime paralyzed by his or her refusal to say, "This is it and this is only." You consider all those voices and alternatives and find value and substance in sincerity there.

**Sharon:** I wish that I was a pluralist. In many ways, I'm a plunker or a spelunker. Here I am, and as time goes by, I see other people moving in these directions individually: my children, my close friends, my spouse, my colleagues. I can see them become advocates for something.

I am quick to act, and fiery in some instances, and very impassioned, as you've heard if you've listened to Tom and me have exchanges. Sustaining that in any serious way—it's fun to joke and to think and to go like this, but most of my life experience has taught me it's a lot more complicated than I think.

**Dean:** Are you thinking about other people's agency or are you just thinking about your own?

**Sharon:** I'm thinking about other people's agency, and the fact that I don't really know. That's why I hate grading. You've got these points you're looking for and "Have they done it or not?" But the truth is, if someone starts here, and they move a large distance, that is a work. Whereas someone starts here, they move up just a little bit—okay, that's a work too. But if you start here and you go this far, that's not a work, that's where you started. Can you find a grading system that accommodates that? It's also about trusting your perception and the other person trusting your perception. You have in fact moved from here to here. You never know.

There are some people who don't find fun in playing with ideas, in pulling things apart and putting them back together and then trying it again. They think, *No, let's get organized and orderly*.

**Dean:** I'm thinking of a member of the last theory class, who late, if ever, was in a class with me the semester before.

**Sharon:** There are some who will not frolic in the fields of the Lord, at least the field I'm taking care of, the one I'm steward over. That's their choice. It hurts, though.

**Dean:** I mentioned, kind of impertinently, the Taliban before—I was going to say that it's reassuring to have measurements and boundaries, especially since the world is lone and it's dreary and it's worse. A lot of people come to us, partly having been indoctrinated by the Church educational system, seeking, hungering for that kind of definition, that kind of exactitude with the kind of judgmental downside that might come with it. You're espousing not a lack of conscience, because there are all sorts of clear principles that inform what you do, but you're advocating playing in the Lord's fields. But the thing is, it's a postlapsarian set of fields. What do we do with the people who feel out of their hearts—and fears and love—that what we do in the humanities is dangerous? That's complicated our life here at BYU.

**Sharon:** I love to frolic and I love ideas and I love playing with ideas. It's thinking about them, it's reflecting on them, and understanding the implications. I'm an extrovert, I'm impulsive, there's a lot of things I like to do like this, but the truth is, especially as I get more experience, you have to step back and watch that. Anytime I feel a strong inclination to judge someone, or react to someone, or a strong desire to shut things down in reaction to a student, I understand that's really about me.

So when someone says the humanities and what we do is dangerous, or that opening ideas like this can be dangerous, I say, "Yes, it can be. You can remove people's compasses and their firm grasp." But I think that mortality is learning how to do that and then finding a new grasp and then going ahead and finding a new grasp. Every individual is different. Every person has more latitude in some ways than others, and in some ways you don't have latitude because you're afraid, but in some ways you don't have latitude because there is a danger to your spiritual life in that.

I always think that if a student struggles or reacts, part of that is, "Golly, did you hate your grandma?"

**Dean:** So it's deep things that we can't access?

**Sharon:** Yes. And it's a struggle not to say, "But this is lovely, listen to these great ideas."

Look at the great YouTube stuff. We found a dog that could quack. It was wonderful! These are outstanding moments. There's a whole new thing about the Whole Foods parking lot in West LA; you've got to catch it on You Tube. It's amazing. Clever and funny.

But if you don't want to waste time on that because you have more important things—there are lots of things. I don't care if I ever learn more about tatting. The world can tat away as much as it wants, and if it became something required of Mormon women again—man, I've tried tatting. It's really hard, I'm not good at it, and I don't care about the product. Well, if you feel that way about film, theory and history, and ideas, if you think a musical's stupid, okay, I got it. But you're in a system that requires tatting. You're in a system that requires your understanding of genre and musicals. You're going to have to figure out how to cope with it. If you're doing string theory, or something else, fine, but you're going to have to stay here and do it that long, in the way you can.

**Dean:** Proving all things and holding fast to that which is good has a subjective component.

**Sharon:** Absolutely. And I understand that it's dangerous, but you don't want to say that to everybody.

**Dean:** It's also rapturous and joyful, which are two more dangerous things. Harold set a good example here. I was surprised by this and gratified by this. He was not sharpening knives at all, but he said it was important for us to discuss some of the struggles and processes that we had. You don't necessarily have to address this, but if you feel comfortable, or if you've got some observations to make, can you talk about that first motion picture studio administration and some of its aspirations for the BYU film program? Maybe characterize where it was going and some of the yeas and nays of that period?

**Sharon:** I think it has to back further. When I came in, Metten had really launched the film program. He had gotten the general education class going and he'd done the retrospectives. Peter Johnson, who was head of the LDS motion picture studio, had helped bring Carl Malden in and done a retrospective. We have moved back and forth institutionally in terms of BFA, BA, BFA, BA. We're doing all of this weaving about *How do you get the most people to have the best experience?* But it tends to be a filter if you have a BFA and you create two classes.

During Peter Johnson's reign—he did become head of the film program for a while—he was very interested in focusing on a BFA style program where people got intense production experience. But it was a certain kind of production experience at which he was expert and interested in.

He was able to say, “Let’s take five students and pull them down to the Motion Picture Studio and we will intern, apprentice, and tutor those students. They will have remarkable experiences and become the Lord’s filmmakers.”

At least that was my perception of what he wanted. That has some merit. It also has some problems, because that’s only five. Even at our lowest numbers, that was a very small percentage of the students. The other difficulty was that the MPS at that point was part of BYU, but it was very much connected to production on a hierarchical LDS Church model. Which meant that you learned certain things. Peter’s background and training was of a certain kind. He did not have much commercial filmmaking experience, as I understood it. He’d done some work in television. I don’t know, you may know more about Peter’s background than I do.

**Dean:** We’re going to ask him later today, actually.

**Sharon:** Are you? Good. I would love to hear his perception of it.

I think it became unfeasible, because the studio was growing and looking in this direction; the school was trying to move this way through the curriculum. The truth is, film production is lousy if you’re trying to do semesters. Films don’t move like that, as we see every year when people go into production. It just won’t stay there.

So to say, “Oh, this long and then we’ll give you a grade and then this long and we’ll give you a grade” doesn’t work. And to have more than two or three classes that are hands-on production didn’t work. When things came back, it was great. There was a lot of turmoil and a lot of difficulty.

I came on as the first academic film person the department had hired. There had been other people, David Sheerer was here, I think Brian Sullivan was here for a while, Paul Nibley was here when I came. But they’d never had someone who was, let us say, a certified higher education academic person. Danielewski had more practical experience too, and Metten’s experience was in theatre mostly. So I was an odd duck. I really loved it, because I had to see what everyone else was doing and try and fit in.

What happened was that the gap between what the MPS and the program were trying to do grew, and then things started crumbling with MPS. The great resolution that I saw was that after the mischief-etcetera’s at MPS, we made a deal where they left and went completely with the Church, and we got Tom Lefler full-time here. That was the best deal BYU ever made in its whole life. He’d been involved with students before, but that transformed everything. Anyone who’s been through the program who wanted to access equipment or had to figure something out, the best way to do it: Lefler’s the guy, and he’s been the guy for twenty-five years.

**Dean:** Like one guy for six draft choices, and you don’t mind giving them up.

**Sharon:** Yes. In some ways he is so different, because of his background. You don’t find very many people who have the expertise and his background—working with an independent film company, the state economic development office, then at the MPS—who also loves to read philosophy and think and reflect on ideas in the same way. That’s a very unusual package.

**Dean:** He’s also an oral historian about people from LA who are attracted to him. Let’s not go further.

Haven’t the odd ducks sort of taken over, or if they haven’t taken over, they’ve accomplished parity? You were mentioning yourself as an academician, and as a scholar in the previous administration being not on the outs, because they were glad to have you and you were part of the community, but you were sort of by yourself. That’s not the case anymore.

**Sharon:** No, but one of the things that happened was the theatre and film program, right? The theatre program became increasingly academic. If you look at the hires, what you’ll see is they’re increasingly academic, and the whole institution has become more measurably academic by national standards. I would say that’s been one of the major shifts.

When I came into the department, it was production focused, and people love production. They'd do some theatre history, they'd do some other stuff, and the film program had some really good courses. To be sure students got some history and saw a lot of films. But a sense of measuring scholars by scholarly work simply didn't exist.

**Dean:** So it was more of a regional and cultural university. These are conversations rooted in the old days, and now we've got contemporary realities. I don't think we need to bemoan them, they're okay. There's some substance here.

**Sharon:** I feel differently about it because I've watched all the changes we've gone through, and quite honestly, in five years it's going to look different. The new hires that are going to replace the old guys like me and Lefler—I know you're younger, I don't mean to include you in the geezers—they're going to be different yet, and it will be exciting to watch what's going to happen. I think demands are made on us.

**Dean:** Peter Johnson, et al.—that bunch, that gang—was interested in creating the Lord's filmmakers after a certain fashion. Do you have a sense—and I'll bet you have three or four answers, or three or four pictures in your mind—of what the filmmakers might look like or behave like? Maybe it's not just a filmmaker, but it's someone that makes a film as he or she watches it or writes about it.

**Sharon:** One of the struggles I had when I first came was that Metten believed in the Lord's filmmakers, and Johnson believed in the Lord's filmmakers. There was a sense not just that we create them for the Church, but we would send them to Los Angeles and transform the industry. That was a promise and that was a hope and that was a belief. I think we have not yet found the way that the Lord's filmmakers come from BYU. We've got people that make films who are faithful and true to the Lord. I'm not sure who the Lord's filmmakers are. I think the Church itself is trying to figure that out. There was a pattern with Kieth Merrill, and now that's moderated and shifted over time.

Who are the Lord's filmmakers? I think those are the people who are making film by watching film, by analyzing film, by thinking about film. Some of them are doing it in their homes. That's where the Lord's filmmakers are. Some of them are doing their own short family films. Some of them are simply learning to understand and deal with the media around them.

This is a great time, because everything is up for grabs. Everything is up for grabs in terms of the business. So where will we go? I'm hoping we'll reach that Utopia where the Internet and everything else means you can produce your own unique material, and it will find people who love it and care about it. Like mommy-bloggers, only film people things. Does that make sense?

Do you know that great thing at the Trax. They opened up the new Trax and had all the mommy-bloggers ride first with their kids? They did a drawing among Utah mommy-bloggers to find the group that would go on the Trax for its first run.

I'm still not sure I can imagine it, but who knows?

**Dean:** You've spent a lot of time thinking about and studying transcendence: the search for the representation or the articulating of spirituality or holiness in film. So you're talking about how, yes, maybe we could be the Lord's filmmakers, but there's lordly, wonderful stuff all over the place. Can you—I know you've got thousands of references here—describe a couple of people, or a couple of practices maybe, and couple of texts that have stirred you and seem to you to be valuable and edifying?

**Sharon:** What I think is beautiful and edifying is what happens as a Mormon person. In fact, the Lord's filmmakers are the audience in some ways for me. You're watching a film, and something touches you. I love all the new Mormon cinema; I don't think it's great cinema, but I love that. What's really interesting is that we start, when we speak about transcendence, to say it's ineffable. I think Andrew Sarris had it right: that if you want to do art or criticism, you have to do film. You have to make a film about an artist. You have to do that.

I think that the spirituality of film is that we're all on the road to Damascus. We're trotting along, and with any luck, you will be stricken with a vision while you're watching a film you never expected to touch you, in some tender, vulnerable, or really agitated part of yourself. For me, with films, it moves you to a different place, and when you go to that place, you are both the filmmaker who's created it, the world of the film and the characters, and you are yourself. That's why it's dangerous, and that's why it's spiritual.

So, transcending means moving from where you are to someplace else with a consequence that lasts longer than the moment of the film itself. It's like when you go to the temple. X number of things happen within this period of time, but what really happens there extends into eternity; it goes back and links, and you carry it within yourself. I'm still trying to figure out how you would describe it. You're interested in it. What would you say?

**Dean:** Think about eminence. You and I have been—for all sorts of reasons, and with good results, I think—we've been concerned with that word. We've been talking about the people who have used that word, and the concepts connected, and thinking more and more about eminence as being relevant. Especially as you talk about the Lord's filmmakers in the way that you did.

**Sharon:** I have a ninety-two-year-old father who's getting really close to dying, and I've thought a lot about this: how you're physically and spiritually present and how the spirit is present in the world. What is eminence? How is it there? I'm in a revisionist period, thinking about that, because what I see is that there is such profound disagreement.

When our students attack some of the classic art films, the ones Schrader loves, or when they speak harshly about some new Mormon cinema, I think, *Where's your charity?*

You talk about understanding the gift they're trying to give you, and it seems to me one of the things you have to do with a filmmaker and a film is to say, "What is there you are trying to give me? What is God trying to give me through this?"

I guess I'm in a really mystical place there. I'm probably less eminent than I have been.

**Dean:** Paul, obviously and famously when he's discussing charity, talks about brass and symbols, and it seems some sort of ethereal or ritual exchange. I'm remembering, I think, St. Theresa, a Spanish Catholic Woman, who said, if I'm remembering correctly, that God is among the saucepans.

**Sharon:** A great Mary/Martha point, right?

**Dean:** Absolutely, and she carries the point. She makes it wonderfully.

As you discuss relationships, the sort of discouraging way that students and big people alike can be so snide and negative and dismissive, what it comes down to is different kinds of charity. There's ethereal brasslike charity, and then there's scrubbing out the pot and not complaining. Is your work, when you think of your work with students, and certainly your hard and frequently not fun work as an administrator, are you a pot scrubber, ultimately? Or have you been able to be in ethereal places as a professor?

**Sharon:** I would say it's a struggle to keep the ethereal going. There are so many pots that need to be scrubbed, and sometimes you're the only one in the kitchen. What's really hard is people are sending pots down to you, and you have to tell other people to scrub those pots when you can't explain to them why those pots need scrubbing or why things have to happen a certain way.

I think one of the great things about moving away from administration is being able to go back to this sense of expansion into being open. Administration work to me is about neediness—about meeting other people's needs and then trying to forge along. I don't like being driven by neediness—my own or a system's or other people's neediness. In some ways, indifference is better than neediness. People aren't open when they're needy. That's why students can't receive things. They're just simply, "I need this, I need this, I need this," and their hands are closed and they can't open them up and receive what people, what films, are giving them. Or "I am convinced I can find it, but I can't open long enough to receive it."

I don't know; I get increasingly more mystical and philosophical, which is probably a good sign—that's the career arc. That's what you do as you go through your life and your career.

**Dean:** The last thing: you're talking about mysticism and ethereal—that's my word—or the philosophical. I'm interested finally in pursuing the notion of the possibilities of reading. You started in English, you went to film, and you are involved in new media more than many or most around here. It's an essential set of questions that you're taking on. What is the current status of reading, and what are the possibilities and blessings of being good readers?

**Sharon:** I'm convinced that all kinds of reading, reception, and engagement is consciousness. When we read a film, some films don't ask us to do anything. It's like being at Lagoon or some fun park. There are others that are more all over the place. Neither one of those approaches is going to give you much when you finish.

So I think part of it is simply saying, "Okay, what can I get when I'm doing this? But if I'm going like this, when I stop at the end, what have I done?"

If you experience a text, any kind of a text, what do you think about afterwards? Aren't you tired of deconstructing television commercials? Or do you just not watch them? I think that having grandchildren around and reencountering *Sprout TV* and *Nickelodeon* and the media saturation that way, I see it pours over them and filters into their pores, and they don't get it. I wonder about that. That's what I think people shriek about and worry about, right? I think literacy, if we will, the capacity to read—read other people, gospel texts, media text, everything around us—is more crucial than it's ever been, and probably more endangered.

**Dean:** People say, "I know how to read. I know all about how to read. I can work this media." But you're saying that without the reflection, there's illiteracy.

**Sharon:** You can. I think many people are very intuitive, and I think the question is, for your craft and your art, how much reflection can you do to strengthen your intuitive capacities without making yourself awkward? We see filmmakers who go through this. They come in, they learn things, right? Then they go on, and they awkwardly begin to construct works with their new consciousness until they come back and recapture that wedding, the integration.

I think now that everyone's a creator of media; we all need to have some of that capacity to honor the intuitive, the spiritual, the prompting, but also to understand the implications of that—that in that prompting I was mocking someone to their disadvantage. I was having fun. It was fun, it was intuitive, it was responsive, but it was me.

**Dean:** It's an unseemly recreation.

**Sharon:** Or components of it are.

**Dean:** So much of our communication is derisive.

**Sharon:** I think the sneering and sniping covers up a huge vulnerability. All of the interests in celebrity and tweeting and amazing reality shows—there's a hunger to know people in some way. It's like we're all out there eating Twinkies.

We're consuming Twinkie, Twinkie, Twinkie, and it's hard to say, "Why don't you have this nice fibrous bran bar?" But someplace we're going to find that people are increasingly trying to find bran in Twinkies. There's an image for you, right? You'd have a chance to digest it and let it go slowly through your system. We've ended up at digestions, started with cows; we must be finished.

**Dean:** Fantastic. Thank you, Sharon.